

LAST STAND

The military's problem with the President's Iran policy.

BY SEYMOUR M. HERSH

On May 31st, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced what appeared to be a major change in U.S. foreign policy. The Bush Administration, she said, would be willing to join Russia, China, and its European allies in direct talks with Iran about its nuclear program. There was a condition, however: the negotiations would not

spoken threat: the U.S. Strategic Command, supported by the Air Force, has been drawing up plans, at the President's direction, for a major bombing campaign in Iran.

Inside the Pentagon, senior commanders have increasingly challenged the President's plans, according to active-duty and retired officers and officials.

"The question we face is, When does innocent infrastructure evolve into something nefarious?" The high-ranking general added that the military's experience in Iraq, where intelligence on weapons of mass destruction was deeply flawed, has affected its approach to Iran. "We built this big monster with Iraq, and there was nothing there. This is son of Iraq," he said.

"There is a war about the war going on inside the building," a Pentagon consultant said. "If we go, we have to find something."

In President Bush's June speech, he accused Iran of pursuing a secret weapons program along with its civilian nuclear-research program (which it is allowed, with limits, under the Nuclear Non-Pro-

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The commanders are "starting to sense the end of the road," a retired general said. "They don't want to be condemned by history."

begin until, as the President put it in a June 19th speech at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, "the Iranian regime fully and verifiably suspends its uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities." Iran, which has insisted on its right to enrich uranium, was being asked to concede the main point of the negotiations before they started. The question was whether the Administration expected the Iranians to agree, or was laying the diplomatic groundwork for future military action. In his speech, Bush also talked about "freedom for the Iranian people," and he added, "Iran's leaders have a clear choice." There was an un-

The generals and admirals have told the Administration that the bombing campaign will probably not succeed in destroying Iran's nuclear program. They have also warned that an attack could lead to serious economic, political, and military consequences for the United States.

A crucial issue in the military's dissent, the officers said, is the fact that American and European intelligence agencies have not found specific evidence of clandestine activities or hidden facilities; the war planners are not sure what to hit. "The target array in Iran is huge, but it's amorphous," a high-ranking general told me.

liferation Treaty). The senior officers in the Pentagon do not dispute the President's contention that Iran intends to eventually build a bomb, but they are frustrated by the intelligence gaps. A former senior intelligence official told me that people in the Pentagon were asking, "What's the evidence? We've got a million tentacles out there, overt and covert, and these guys"—the Iranians—"have been working on this for eighteen years, and we have nothing? We're coming up with jack shit."

A senior military official told me, "Even if we knew where the Iranian enriched uranium was—and we don't—

GUY BILLOUT

we don't know where world opinion would stand. The issue is whether it's a clear and present danger. If you're a military planner, you try to weigh options. What is the capability of the Iranian response, and the likelihood of a punitive response—like cutting off oil shipments? What would that cost us?" Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his senior aides "really think they can do this on the cheap, and they underestimate the capability of the adversary," he said.

In 1986, Congress authorized the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to act as the "principal military adviser" to the President. In this case, I was told, the current chairman, Marine General Peter Pace, has gone further in his advice to the White House by addressing the consequences of an attack on Iran. "Here's the military telling the President what he can't do *politically*"—raising concerns about rising oil prices, for example—the former senior intelligence official said. "The J.C.S. chairman going to the President with an economic argument—what's going on here?" (General Pace and the White House declined to comment. The Defense Department responded to a detailed request for comment by saying that the Administration was "working diligently" on a diplomatic solution and that it could not comment on classified matters.)

A retired four-star general, who ran a major command, said, "The system is starting to sense the end of the road, and

they don't want to be condemned by history. They want to be able to say, 'We stood up.'"

The military leadership is also raising tactical arguments against the proposal for bombing Iran, many of which are related to the consequences for Iraq. According to retired Army Major General William Nash, who was commanding general of the First Armored Division, served in Iraq and Bosnia, and worked for the United Nations in Kosovo, attacking Iran would heighten the risks to American and coalition forces inside Iraq. "What if one hundred thousand Iranian volunteers came across the border?" Nash asked. "If we bomb Iran, they cannot retaliate militarily by air—only on the ground or by sea, and only in Iraq or the Gulf. A military planner cannot discount that possibility, and he cannot make an ideological assumption that the Iranians wouldn't do it. We're not talking about victory or defeat—only about what damage Iran could do to our interests." Nash, now a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, said, "Their first possible response would be to send forces into Iraq. And, since the Iraqi Army has limited capacity, it means that the coalition forces would have to engage them."

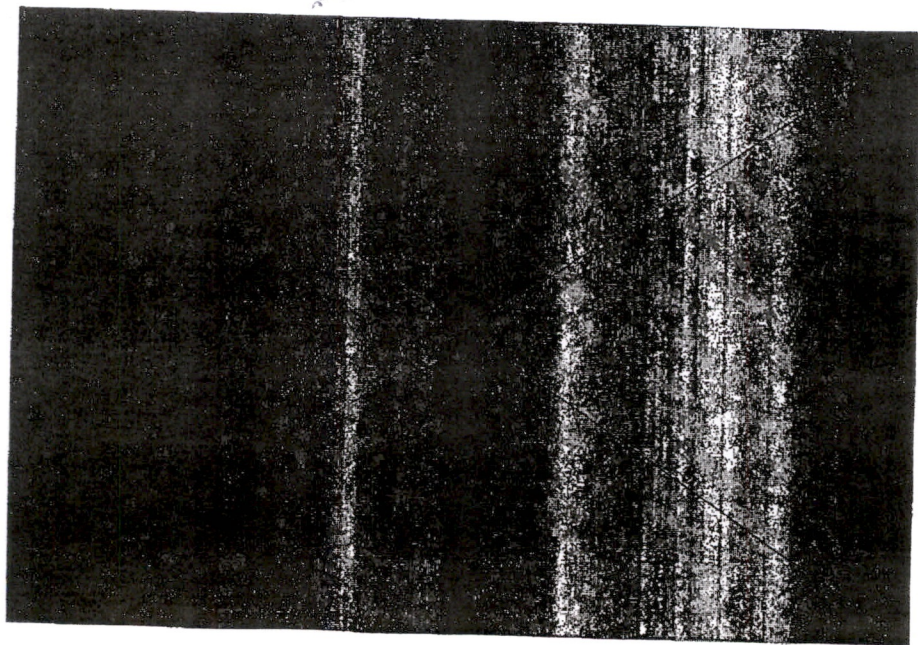
The Americans serving as advisers to the Iraqi police and military may be at special risk, Nash added, since an American bombing "would be seen not only as an attack on Shiites but as an attack on all Muslims. Throughout the Middle East,

it would likely be seen as another example of American imperialism. It would probably cause the war to spread."

In contrast, some conservatives are arguing that America's position in Iraq would improve if Iran chose to retaliate there, according to a government consultant with close ties to the Pentagon's civilian leaders, because Iranian interference would divide the Shiites into pro- and anti-Iranian camps, and unify the Kurds and the Sunnis. The Iran hawks in the White House and the State Department, including Elliott Abrams and Michael Doran, both of whom are National Security Council advisers on the Middle East, also have an answer for those who believe that the bombing of Iran would put American soldiers in Iraq at risk, the consultant said. He described the counter-argument this way: "Yes, there will be Americans under attack, but they are under attack now."

Iran's geography would also complicate an air war. The senior military official said that, when it came to air strikes, "this is not Iraq," which is fairly flat, except in the northeast. "Much of Iran is akin to Afghanistan in terms of topography and flight mapping—a pretty tough target," the military official said. Over rugged terrain, planes have to come in closer, and "Iran has a lot of mature air-defense systems and networks," he said. "Global operations are always risky, and if we go down that road we have to be prepared to follow up with ground troops."

The U.S. Navy has a separate set of concerns. Iran has more than seven hundred undeclared dock and port facilities along its Persian Gulf coast. The small ports, known as "invisible piers," were constructed two decades ago by Iran's Revolutionary Guards to accommodate small private boats used for smuggling. (The Guards relied on smuggling to finance their activities and enrich themselves.) The ports, an Iran expert who advises the U.S. government told me, provide "the infrastructure to enable the Guards to go after American aircraft carriers with suicide water bombers"—small vessels loaded with high explosives. He said that the Iranians have conducted exercises in the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow channel linking the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea and then on to the Indian Ocean. The strait is regularly traversed by oil tankers, in which a thousand small Ira-



nian boats simulated attacks on American ships. "That would be the hardest problem we'd face in the water: a thousand small targets weaving in and out among our ships."

America's allies in the Gulf also believe that an attack on Iran would endanger them, and many American military planners agree. "Iran can do a lot of things—all asymmetrical," a Pentagon adviser on counter-insurgency told me. "They have agents all over the Gulf, and the ability to strike at will." In May, according to a well-informed oil-industry expert, the Emir of Qatar made a private visit to Tehran to discuss security in the Gulf after the Iraq war. He sought some words of non-aggression from the Iranian leadership. Instead, the Iranians suggested that Qatar, which is the site of the regional headquarters of the U.S. Central Command, would be its first target in the event of an American attack. Qatar is a leading exporter of gas and currently operates several major offshore oil platforms, all of which would be extremely vulnerable. (Nasser bin Hamad M. al-Khalifa, Qatar's ambassador to Washington, denied that any threats were issued during the Emir's meetings in Tehran. He told me that it was "a very nice visit.")

A retired American diplomat, who has experience in the Gulf, confirmed that the Qatari government is "very scared of what America will do" in Iran, and "scared to death" about what Iran would do in response. Iran's message to the oil-producing Gulf states, the retired diplomat said, has been that it will respond, and "you are on the wrong side of history."

In late April, the military leadership, headed by General Pace, achieved a major victory when the White House dropped its insistence that the plan for a bombing campaign include the possible use of a nuclear device to destroy Iran's uranium-enrichment plant at Natanz, nearly two hundred miles south of Tehran. The huge complex includes large underground facilities built into seventy-five-foot-deep holes in the ground and designed to hold as many as fifty thousand centrifuges. "Bush and Cheney were dead serious about the nuclear planning," the former senior intelligence official told me. "And Pace stood up to them. Then the word came back: 'O.K., the nuclear option is politically unacceptable.'" At the

time, a number of retired officers, including two Army major generals who served in Iraq, Paul Eaton and Charles Swan-nack, Jr., had begun speaking out against the Administration's handling of the Iraq war. This period is known to many in the Pentagon as "the April Revolution."

"An event like this doesn't get papered over very quickly," the former official added. "The bad feelings over the nuclear option are still felt. The civilian hierarchy feels extraordinarily betrayed by the brass, and the brass feel they were tricked into it"—the nuclear planning—"by being asked to provide all options in the planning papers."

Sam Gardiner, a military analyst who taught at the National War College before retiring from the Air Force as a colonel, said that Rumsfeld's second-guessing and micromanagement were a fundamental problem. "Plans are more and more being directed and run by civilians from the Office of the Secretary of Defense," Gardiner said. "It causes a lot of tensions. I'm hearing that the military is increasingly upset about not being taken seriously by Rumsfeld and his staff."

Gardiner went on, "The consequence is that, for Iran and other missions, Rumsfeld will be pushed more and more in the direction of special operations, where he has direct authority and does not have to put up with the objections of the Chiefs." Since taking office in 2001, Rumsfeld has been engaged in a running dispute with many senior commanders over his plans to transform the military, and his belief that future wars will be fought, and won, with airpower and Special Forces. That combination worked, at first, in Afghanistan, but the growing stalemate there, and in Iraq, has created a rift, especially inside the Army. The senior military official said, "The policymakers are in love with Special Ops—the guys on camels."

The discord over Iran can, in part, be ascribed to Rumsfeld's testy relationship with the generals. They see him as high-handed and unwilling to accept responsibility for what has gone wrong in Iraq. A former Bush Administration official described a recent meeting between Rumsfeld and four-star generals and admirals at a military commanders' conference, on a base outside Washington, that, he was told, went badly. The commanders later told General Pace that "they didn't come here to be lectured by the Defense Secre-

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tary. They wanted to tell Rumsfeld what their concerns were." A few of the officers attended a subsequent meeting between Pace and Rumsfeld, and were unhappy, the former official said, when "Pace did not repeat any of their complaints. There was disappointment about Pace." The retired four-star general also described the commanders' conference as "very fractious." He added, "We've got twenty-five hundred dead, people running all over the world doing stupid things, and officers outside the Beltway asking, 'What the hell is going on?'"

Pace's supporters say that he is in a difficult position, given Rumsfeld's penchant for viewing generals who disagree with him as disloyal. "It's a very narrow line between being responsive and effective and being outspoken and ineffective," the former senior intelligence official said.

But Rumsfeld is not alone in the Administration where Iran is concerned; he is closely allied with Dick Cheney, and, the Pentagon consultant said, "the President generally defers to the Vice-President on all these issues," such as dealing with the specifics of a bombing campaign if diplomacy fails. "He feels that Cheney has an informational advantage. Cheney is not a renegade. He represents the conventional wisdom in all of this. He appeals to the strategic-bombing lobby in the Air Force—who think that carpet bombing is the solution to all problems."

Bombing may not work against Natanz, let alone against the rest of Iran's nuclear program. The possibility of using tactical nuclear weapons gained support in the Administration because of the belief that it was the only way to insure the destruction of Natanz's buried laboratories. When that option proved to be politically untenable (a nuclear warhead would, among other things, vent fatal radiation for miles) the Air Force came up with a new bombing plan, using advanced guidance systems to deliver a series of large bunker-busters (conventional bombs filled with high explosives) on the same target, in swift succession. The Air Force argued that the impact would generate sufficient concussive force to accomplish what a tactical nuclear warhead would achieve, but without provoking an outcry over what would be

the first use of a nuclear weapon in a conflict since Nagasaki.

The new bombing concept has provoked controversy among Pentagon planners and outside experts. Robert Pape, a professor at the University of Chicago who has taught at the Air Force's School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, told me, "We always have a few new toys, new gimmicks, and rarely do these new tricks lead to a phenomenal breakthrough. The dilemma is that Natanz is a very large underground area, and even if the roof came down we won't be able to get a good estimate of the bomb damage without people on the ground. We don't even know where it goes underground, and we won't have much confidence in assessing what we've actually done. Absent capturing an Iranian nuclear scientist and documents, it's impossible to set back the program for sure."

One complicating aspect of the multiple-hit tactic, the Pentagon consultant told me, is "the liquefaction problem"—the fact that the soil would lose its consistency due to the enormous heat generated by the impact of the first bomb. "It will be like bombing water, with its currents and eddies. The bombs would likely be diverted." Intelligence has also shown that for the past two years the Iranians have been shifting their most sensitive nuclear-related materials and production facilities, moving some into urban areas, in anticipation of a bombing raid.

"The Air Force is hawking it to the other services," the former senior intelligence official said. "They're all excited by it, but they're being terribly criticized for it." The main problem, he said, is that the other services do not believe the tactic will work. "The Navy says, 'It's not our plan.' The Marines are against it—they know they're going to be the guys on the ground if things go south."

"It's the bomber mentality," the Pentagon consultant said. "The Air Force is saying, 'We've got it covered, we can hit all the distributed targets.'" The Air Force arsenal includes a cluster bomb that can deploy scores of small bomblets with individual guidance systems to home in on specific targets. The weapons were deployed in Kosovo and during the early stages of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the Air Force is claiming that the same techniques can be used with larger bombs, allowing them to be targeted from twenty-

five thousand feet against a multitude of widely dispersed targets. "The Chiefs all know that 'shock and awe' is dead on arrival," the Pentagon consultant said. "All except the Air Force."

"Rumsfeld and Cheney are the pushers on this—they don't want to repeat the mistake of doing too little," the government consultant with ties to Pentagon civilians told me. "The lesson they took from Iraq is that there should have been more troops on the ground"—an impossibility in Iran, because of the overextension of American forces in Iraq—"so the air war in Iran will be one of overwhelming force."

Many of the Bush Administration's supporters view the abrupt change in negotiating policy as a deft move that won public plaudits and obscured the fact that Washington had no other good options. "The United States has done what its international partners have asked it to do," said Patrick Clawson, who is an expert on Iran and the deputy director for research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a conservative think tank. "The ball is now in their court—for both the Iranians and the Europeans." Bush's goal, Clawson said, was to assuage his allies, as well as Russia and China, whose votes, or abstentions, in the United Nations would be needed if the talks broke down and the U.S. decided to seek Security Council sanctions or a U.N. resolution that allowed for the use of force against Iran.

"If Iran refuses to re-start negotiations, it will also be difficult for Russia and China to reject a U.N. call for International Atomic Energy Agency inspections," Clawson said. "And the longer we go without accelerated I.A.E.A. access, the more important the issue of Iran's hidden facilities will become." The drawback to the new American position, Clawson added, was that "the Iranians might take Bush's agreeing to join the talks as a sign that their hard line has worked."

Clawson acknowledged that intelligence on Iran's nuclear-weapons progress was limited. "There was a time when we had reasonable confidence in what we knew," he said. "We could say, 'There's less time than we think,' or, 'It's going more slowly.' Take your choice. Lack of information is a problem, but

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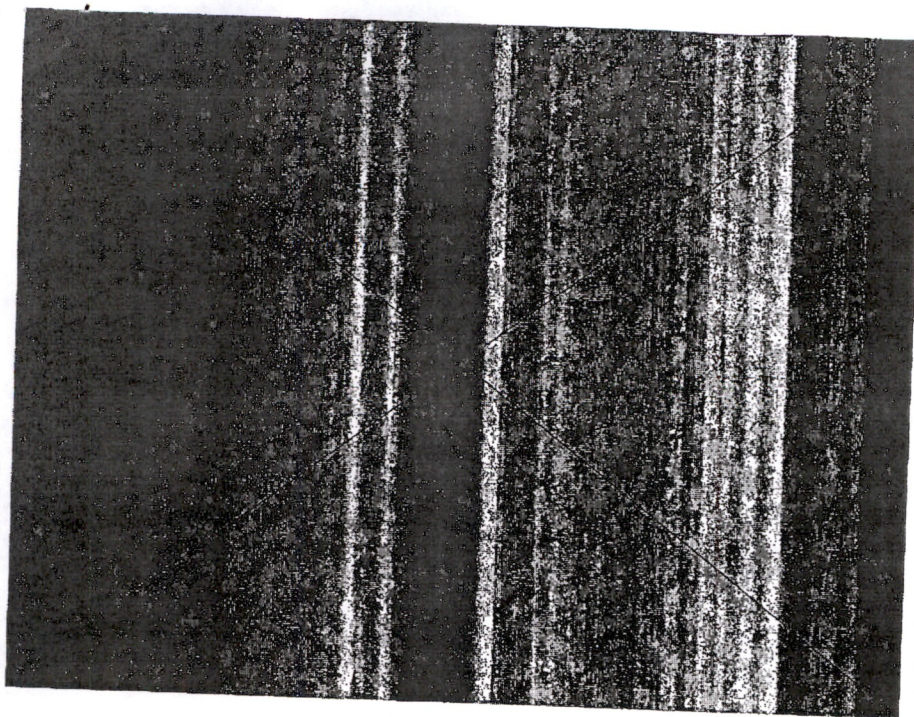
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we know they've made rapid progress with their centrifuges." (The most recent American intelligence estimate is that Iran could build a warhead sometime between 2010 and 2015.)

Flynt Leverett, a former National Security Council aide for the Bush Administration, told me, "The only reason Bush and Cheney relented about talking to Iran was because they were within weeks of a diplomatic meltdown in the United Nations. Russia and China were going to stiff us"—that is, prevent the passage of a U.N. resolution. Leverett, a project director at the New America Foundation, added that the White House's proposal, despite offering trade and economic incentives for Iran, has not "resolved any of the fundamental contradictions of U.S. policy." The precondition for the talks, he said—an open-ended halt to all Iranian enrichment activity—"amounts to the President wanting a guarantee that they'll surrender before he talks to them. Iran cannot accept long-term constraints on its fuel-cycle activity as part of a settlement without a security guarantee"—for example, some form of mutual non-aggression pact with the United States.

Leverett told me that, without a change in U.S. policy, the balance of power in the negotiations will shift to Russia. "Russia sees Iran as a beachhead against American interests in the Middle East, and they're playing a very sophisti-

cated game," he said. "Russia is quite comfortable with Iran having nuclear fuel cycles that would be monitored, and they'll support the Iranian position"—in part, because it gives them the opportunity to sell billions of dollars' worth of nuclear fuel and materials to Tehran. "They believe they can manage their long- and short-term interests with Iran, and still manage the security interests," Leverett said. China, which, like Russia, has veto power on the Security Council, was motivated in part by its growing need for oil, he said. "They don't want punitive measures, such as sanctions, on energy producers, and they don't want to see the U.S. take a unilateral stance on a state that matters to them." But, he said, "they're happy to let Russia take the lead in this." (China, a major purchaser of Iranian oil, is negotiating a multibillion-dollar deal with Iran for the purchase of liquefied natural gas over twenty-five years.) As for the Bush Administration, he added, "unless there's a shift, it's only a question of when its policy falls apart."

It's not clear whether the Administration will be able to keep the Europeans in accord with American policy if the talks break down. Morton Abramowitz, a former head of State Department intelligence, who was one of the founders of the International Crisis Group, said, "The world is different than it was three years ago, and while the Europeans want good

relations with us, they will not go to war with Iran unless they know that an exhaustive negotiating effort was made by Bush. There's just too much involved, like the price of oil. There will be great pressure put on the Europeans, but I don't think they'll roll over and support a war."

The Europeans, like the generals at the Pentagon, are concerned about the quality of intelligence. A senior European intelligence official said that while "there was every reason to assume" that the Iranians were working on a bomb, there wasn't enough evidence to exclude the possibility that they were bluffing, and hadn't moved beyond a civilian research program. The intelligence official was not optimistic about the current negotiations. "It's a mess, and I don't see any possibility, at the moment, of solving the problem," he said. "The only thing to do is contain it. The question is, What is the redline? Is it when you master the nuclear fuel cycle? Or is it just about building a bomb?" Every country had a different criterion, he said. One worry he had was that, in addition to its security concerns, the Bush Administration was driven by its interest in "democratizing" the region. "The United States is on a mission," he said.

A European diplomat told me that his government would be willing to discuss Iran's security concerns—a dialogue he said Iran offered Washington three years ago. The diplomat added that "no one wants to be faced with the alternative if the negotiations don't succeed: either accept the bomb or bomb them. That's why our goal is to keep the pressure on, and see what Iran's answer will be."

A second European diplomat, speaking of the Iranians, said, "Their tactic is going to be to stall and appear reasonable—to say, 'Yes, but . . .' We know what's going on, and the timeline we're under. The Iranians have repeatedly been in violation of I.A.E.A. safeguards and have given us years of coverup and deception. The international community does not want them to have a bomb, and if we let them continue to enrich that's throwing in the towel—giving up before we talk." The diplomat went on, "It would be a mistake to predict an inevitable failure of our strategy. Iran is a regime that is primarily concerned with its own survival, and if its existence is threatened

it would do whatever it needed to do—including backing down.” ?

The Iranian regime's calculations about its survival also depend on internal political factors. The nuclear program is popular with the Iranian people, including those—the young and the secular—who are most hostile to the religious leadership. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the President of Iran, has effectively used the program to rally the nation behind him, and against Washington. Ahmadinejad and the ruling clerics have said that they believe Bush's goal is not to prevent them from building a bomb but to drive them out of office. *not*

Several current and former officials I spoke to expressed doubt that President Bush would settle for a negotiated resolution of the nuclear crisis. A former high-level Pentagon civilian official, who still deals with sensitive issues for the government, said that Bush remains confident in his military decisions. The President and others in the Administration often invoke Winston Churchill, both privately and in public, as an example of a politician who, in his own time, was punished in the polls but was rewarded by history for rejecting appeasement. In one speech, Bush said, Churchill “seemed like a Texan to me. He wasn't afraid of public-opinion polls. . . . He charged ahead, and the world is better for it.”

The Israelis have insisted for years that Iran has a clandestine program to build a bomb, and will do so as soon as it can. Israeli officials have emphasized that their “redline” is the moment Iran masters the nuclear fuel cycle, acquiring the technical ability to produce weapons-grade uranium. “Iran managed to surprise everyone in terms of the enrichment capability,” one diplomat familiar with the Israeli position told me, referring to Iran's announcement, this spring, that it had successfully enriched uranium to the 3.6-per-cent level needed to fuel a nuclear-power reactor. The Israelis believe that Iran must be stopped as soon as possible, because, once it is able to enrich uranium for fuel, the next step—enriching it to the ninety-per-cent level needed for a nuclear bomb—is merely a mechanical process.

Israeli intelligence, however, has also failed to provide specific evidence about secret sites in Iran, according to current

and former military and intelligence officials. In May, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert visited Washington and, addressing a joint session of Congress, said that Iran “stands on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons” that would pose “an existential threat” to Israel. Olmert noted that Ahmadinejad had questioned the reality of the Holocaust, and he added, “It is not Israel's threat alone. It is a threat to all those committed to stability in the Middle East and to the well-being of the world at large.” But at a secret intelligence exchange that took place at the Pentagon during the visit, the Pentagon consultant said, “what the Israelis provided fell way short” of what would be needed to publicly justify preventive action.

The issue of what to do, and when, seems far from resolved inside the Israeli government. Martin Indyk, a former U.S. Ambassador to Israel, who is now the director of the Brookings Institution's Saban Center for Middle East Policy, told me, “Israel would like to see diplomacy succeed, but they're worried that in the meantime Iran will cross a threshold of nuclear know-how—and they're worried about an American military attack not working. They assume they'll be struck first in retaliation by Iran.” Indyk added, “At the end of the day, the United States can live with Iranian, Pakistani, and Indian nuclear bombs—but for Israel there's no Mutual Assured Destruction. If they have to live with an Iranian bomb, there will be a great deal of anxiety in Israel, and a lot of tension between Israel and Iran, and between Israel and the U.S.”

Iran has not, so far, officially answered President Bush's proposal. But its initial response has been dismissive. In a June 22nd interview with the *Guardian*, Ali Larijani, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, rejected Washington's demand that Iran suspend all uranium enrichment before talks could begin. “If they want to put this prerequisite, why are we negotiating at all?” Larijani said. “We should put aside the sanctions and give up all this talk about regime change.” He characterized the American offer as a “sermon,” and insisted that Iran was not building a bomb. “We don't want the bomb,” he said. Ahmadinejad has said that Iran would make a formal counterproposal by August 22nd, but last week

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme religious leader, declared, on state radio, “Negotiation with the United States has no benefits for us.”

Despite the tough rhetoric, Iran would be reluctant to reject a dialogue with the United States, according to Giandomenico Picco, who, as a representative of the United Nations, helped to negotiate the ceasefire that ended the Iran-Iraq War, in 1988. “If you engage a superpower, you feel you are a superpower,” Picco told me. “And now the haggling in the Persian bazaar begins. We are negotiating over a carpet”—the suspected weapons program—“that we're not sure exists, and that we don't want to exist. And if at the end there never was a carpet it'll be the negotiation of the century.”

If the talks do break down, and the Administration decides on military action, the generals will, of course, follow their orders; the American military remains loyal to the concept of civilian control. But some officers have been pushing for what they call the “middle way,” which the Pentagon consultant described as “a mix of options that require a number of Special Forces teams and air cover to protect them to send into Iran to grab the evidence so the world will know what Iran is doing.” He added that, unlike Rumsfeld, he and others who support this approach were under no illusion that it could bring about regime change. The goal, he said, was to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis.

Mohamed ElBaradei, the director general of the I.A.E.A., said in a speech this spring that his agency believed there was still time for diplomacy to achieve that goal. “We should have learned some lessons from Iraq,” ElBaradei, who won the Nobel Peace Prize last year, said. “We should have learned that we should be very careful about assessing our intelligence. . . . We should have learned that we should try to exhaust every possible diplomatic means to solve the problem before thinking of any other enforcement measures.”

He went on, “When you push a country into a corner, you are always giving the driver's seat to the hard-liners. . . . If Iran were to move out of the nonproliferation regime altogether, if Iran were to develop a nuclear weapon program, we clearly will have a much, much more serious problem.” ♦

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